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Iran's elections a soft-power boon

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

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Iran's colorful and highly contentious presidential election can be expected to prove a major boon for the country's foreign policy, no matter who is voted into office when those among the 46 million eligible voters go to the polls on Friday.

Described by the international media as "extraordinarily open" and "highly competitive", the election process has been internally polarizing and has generated excess public interest that will likely continue once the sound and fury of election euphoria is over. Yet, the net impact with respect to Iran's foreign priorities is bound to be positive.

This is because the polls will give the incoming regime international respectability and legitimacy following a dynamic electoral race that has boiled down to four main candidates.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, a reformist, has emerged as the main challenger to President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who is running for another four-year term. Mohsen Rezai represents the main conservative challenge; he is a former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. Mehdi Karroubi is a former parliamentary speaker and comes from the reformist camp.

In international relations, the image of a country and the degree of its attractiveness is shaped by elements such as its domestic politics, culture, values and foreign policies.

In the case of the United States, neo-liberal thinkers such as academic Robert Keohane and Harvard Professor Joseph Nye have been counseling Washington for some time on the necessity of soft power measures to reverse what Nye refers to as "America's declining popularity", such as by shifting from unilateralism to multilateralism and relying on "smart diplomacy".

The same argument applies to Iran, as the presidential race has afforded the critics of Ahmadinejad the unique opportunity to blame him for "adventurism, extremism, impressionism and sloganism", to paraphrase Mousavi.

Karroubi has questioned Ahmadinejad's purported denial of the Holocaust by arguing that "this is not an issue for Iran", while Rezaei has offered a detailed, step-by-step plan for detente with the West.

Such open debates on all aspects of Iran's domestic and foreign policies, using, for the first time, the all-too-important medium of television, reflect a maturing Islamic Republic that is in the throes of a qualitative expansion of its public sphere. This political evolution is on full display before the world community.

The ultimate test of the legitimacy of the elections arrives on Friday when an estimated 60% of the [electorate](#) goes to the polls. The two reformist candidates have filed objections over the number of ballots printed - they say there are too many. This issue is expected to be resolved, though, and the next president should be able to convince the world that he has a national mandate, which includes continuing with the country's nuclear program and negotiating with other countries.

The United States has over the past few years led the condemnation of Iran for its uranium-enrichment program, which it says could be aimed at developing a nuclear weapon. Tehran claims it has the right in terms of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which it is a signatory, to follow such a program. Iran has been slapped with several rounds of United Nations sanctions as well as unilateral ones from the US for not halting its operations.

According to a number of political analysts in Iran, a more moderate president, such as Mousavi, who has defended Iran's nuclear activities, would be more effective than Ahmadinejad in fighting against the current efforts to impose further sanctions on Iran. This he could do by denying Iran's enemies the tool of branding Iran as radical, rogue, untrustworthy or any of the terms in the arsenal of Iran-bashing labels made available to them by Ahmadinejad's fiery rhetoric.

That may be so, but it is doubtful Western strategy will change much in event of Ahmadinejad's defeat by a more moderate politician, just as the pressures of US sanctions against Iran did not disappear when the Islamist liberal democrat Mohammad Khatami was in power from 1999 to 2005.

With the exception of cosmetic changes, such as a token reduction of US sanctions, the US maintained the heat on Iran despite Khatami's policy of detente. This they did by dismissing Khatami as a "front" and claiming the real power lay with hardliners behind the scenes. This could happen again.

On the other hand, should Ahmadinejad win [re-election](#) (the incumbent has never lost a re-election bid since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979), he can pursue Iran's nuclear policies with an even stronger hand. He will be able to rely on the legitimacy conferred by the elections, particularly if he draws the right lessons from his first term and adopts more nuanced and tactful diplomacy.

This scenario is based on the soft-power significance of the presidential race, that is, the ability to attract and persuade others increases when "the policies of a country are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others", to quote Nye.

Put simply, no matter who wins, the election process is bound to impact the calculations of

the US and its allies and have a "game-changing" effect that reduces the maneuverability of the anti-Iran coalition that the US has been trying to put together in the Middle East for some time.

Rhetoric aside, the Barack [Obama administration](#) has shown a great deal of continuity with the George [W Bush](#) administration, by pursuing, in part via its Iran point man, Dennis Ross, the diplomatic track of bifurcating the region into "moderate" and "radical" camps. The former includes Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, with Iran, Syria, Hamas in Palestine and Lebanon's Hezbollah in the other camp.

The election for the 10th president of Islamic Republic exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of putting the considerably more [democratic](#) Iran below authoritarian Arab monarchies, as there is nothing "moderate" about the repression of women or Shi'ite minorities in Saudi Arabia, no matter how Washington spins it.

More than the nuclear issue, what the conservative oil sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf fear is Iran's brand of Islamist democracy that has mobilized masses of Iranians. The long-demobilized and politically docile populations in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) could use Iran as a reference society and question the legitimacy of their archaic and tribal political systems that are perpetuated by the US for the sake of geo-economic and geostrategic interests.